

**U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service**



# **News Release**

*Great Lakes - Big Rivers Region  
External Affairs Office*

**Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, 1 Federal Drive, Ft. Snelling, MN 55111-4056  
612/713-5360 Fax: 612/713-5280 <http://midwest.fws.gov>**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
July 11, 2006  
EA 06 - 37**

**CONTACT:  
Don Hultman, 507-494-6218  
Chuck Traxler, 612-868-9482**

## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today, released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge which will guide management and administration of the 240,000-acre, multi-state refuge for the next 15 years.

The preferred alternative in the EIS, Alternative E: Modified Wildlife and Integrated Public Use Focus, seeks to balance the needs of fish and wildlife with the needs of the public for recreation. All current public uses on the refuge will continue, although the plan outlines several areas or zones where means of access and use would be affected.

Alternative E outlines a broad range of actions to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, complete land acquisition within the refuge, address water quality issues, provide more effective rest areas for waterfowl and other birds, provide high quality wildlife-dependent recreation, and balance the needs of various user groups.

The preferred alternative was developed after evaluating input and comments from the public. Since August 2002, the refuge has hosted 46 public meetings and workshops attended by 4,500 people from river communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois. Refuge staff has also had numerous meetings with the states' conservation agencies, the Army Corps of Engineers and several conservation and sporting groups. The refuge also received and considered 3,230 written comments to management alternatives contained in draft plans.

- MORE -

“All the comments we received, both written and verbal, reflected an amazing diversity of viewpoints,” said Refuge Manager Don Hultman. “It’s obvious citizens love the Upper Mississippi River, and that passion bodes well for the future of the refuge, the river, and the fish and wildlife that call it home.”

Hultman said the preferred alternative strikes the best balance between the needs of wildlife and the needs of the people. “I believe we have been responsive to the public, but also know that it is perhaps impossible to please everyone on a refuge of this size and scope,” he said.

The most contentious aspects of the plan have been proposed changes to areas closed to waterfowl hunting which provide a series of stepping-stone sanctuaries for waterfowl during fall migration; establishment of electric motor and seasonal slow, no wake areas to reduce disturbance to wildlife and address conflicts between user groups; and, the phase-out of permanent waterfowl hunting blinds or structures which have evolved to proprietary use of a public refuge.

“These are difficult issues and some represent significant change for many people, but we believe the plan is necessary to meet the resource purposes for which the refuge was established while meeting the needs of a diverse public which enjoys the refuge in many ways,” Hultman said.

He said the preferred alternative plan in the Final EIS, in response to public and agency comment, reflects numerous changes from both the draft released in May 2005 and the draft Alternative E released as an EIS supplement in December 2005.

Implementing the preferred alternative will cost an estimated \$228 million over 15 years, with 78 percent, or \$177 million, directly related to habitat improvement through enhancement projects and completing land acquisition within the refuge boundary.

Significant changes reflected in Alternative E in the Final EIS include:

- Changes to locations and boundaries of several proposed Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas, with slightly less acreage overall than the current system established in 1958.
- Dropping the “no fishing, no motors” provision for Closed Areas in favor of Voluntary Avoidance for large areas and No Motors and Voluntary Avoidance for small areas, with restrictions taking effect October 15 -- versus October 1 -- each year to extend fall fishing.
- Dropping the 25 shotshell daily limit and 100 yard spacing regulations for waterfowl hunting.

- MORE -

- Dropping the fee managed hunt proposal for the Gibbs Lake Area of Lake Onalaska in Pool 7 in favor of devising a plan with waterfowlers.
- Reducing the number of Electric Motor Areas from 17 to 5; but designating eight Slow, No Wake Areas where from March 16 to October 31 watercraft must go slow and airboats or hovercraft operation is prohibited. These designated areas collectively cover about eight percent of the water area of the refuge.
- Dropping the restrictions on areas open to camping and new alcohol and human waste regulations, but adding a new regulation prohibiting glass containers when afoot on refuge lands.
- Dropping the proposal for a launch fee at Refuge-administered boat ramps.
- Opening an additional 678 acres to hunting to help hunters displaced by changes to the Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area in Pool 4, and delaying implementation to 2009 to allow time to gather more information about bird use in the Nelson-Trevino area.
- Delaying implementation of the Black River Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area in Pool 7 until 2008 to allow more time to explore an alternative area proposed by the public.
- Dropping the proposed Goose Island Special Hunt Area (235 acres) in Pool 8.
- Reducing the size of the Reno Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area in Pool 9 by 866 acres.
- Simplifying the paired waterfowl hunting closed areas in Pool 10 by reducing the size of the north area (McGregor Lake) by 500 acres and making it a standard closed area, and making the Wisconsin River Delta a Special Hunt Area (no hunting or trapping November 1 to end of duck season only) versus a closed area.
- Designating only about five miles of river in Pool 11 (Grant County, Wis.) as “no open water waterfowl hunting” versus all refuge areas in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The next step in the planning process is a decision by the Regional Director, Midwest Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Fort Snelling, Minn. on which alternative in the Final EIS will become the final management plan for the refuge. This decision is made after a required 30-day minimum waiting period and recorded in a formal Record of Decision. A decision is expected in late August.

- MORE -